

Highlights in Tobacco Control

A Newsletter for Texas Communities

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Media Advocacy at the Local Level: *You Can Make a Difference*

Working on tobacco prevention and control issues in Texas requires a variety of tools and resources. While some of these techniques cost money, others are free to anyone willing to invest some time and energy. Media advocacy (MA) is one such technique.

MA has been defined as "the strategic use of mass media to advance a social or public policy initiative."¹ Others have described MA as "the use of media to amplify our voices and be heard in our efforts for change."²

Changing policy is the goal of MA. This can mean not only promoting the public health aspects of an issue but also counteracting the other side of that policy issue.



Writing guest editorials in your local newspaper is one way to promote tobacco prevention and control issues in the community.

Especially in the area of tobacco prevention and control, there always seem to be counterpoints in need of advocates' attention.

The tobacco industry in particular is able to spend over \$600 million annually in Texas promoting their products. Lobbying and political contributions are other methods used by the industry to exert their policy preferences in the public arena.

In contrast, public health will never have the means to directly

compete with the tobacco companies on the field of message promotion. Plus, state law prohibits lobbying by state employees. However, MA is an effective, no-cost to low-cost way of publicizing pro-health perspectives.

MA involves building relationships with members of the media and then working with them to see that public health matters receive favorable news coverage. Working with the media means being both reactive and proactive.

Getting to know reporters and editors who support tobacco prevention takes time and more than a little effort. In the long run, though, advocates for public health find that this investment is definitely worth it.

Working with the Media: How to Hype It!

What is news?

While we see and hear news everyday, a standard definition of the term may help when doing media advocacy. News is what is different, unusual, and new. It must be or seem to be important. And it must be a current event, not history.

What are the 5 components of a news story?

Just as a recipe calls for specific ingredients, so does a news story require key components. In this case, the five key components are the 5 W's:

- ♦ Who
- ♦ What
- ♦ When
- ♦ Where
- ♦ Why

To get a message across most effectively, the information should answer each of the 5 W's clearly and concisely. It is also important to remember that focusing on a specific topic of interest is more effective than a broad or too generalized approach.

What are some methods of communication?

Basic methods of communication include the news advisory, news release, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces.

A news advisory alerts the news media to an upcoming event such as a press conference or rally. The advisory should be limited to one page and include the 5 W's. It should be faxed or mailed to the media 3-7 days before the event. Be sure to list any opportunities for interviews and photos that will be available.

A news release tells the media what your organization is doing. It includes details of the event that were not mentioned in the news advisory. A news release addresses aspects of an upcoming event.

The first paragraph should include the 5 W's. The rest of the release should contain quotes from sponsors, participants, sponsors,

event planners, and any VIPs involved in the event. Be sure to include the name and phone number of your organization's media-contact person.

Letters to the editor of a newspaper help raise awareness of a local issue. They also can make larger issues at the state or national level relevant to the local community. A letter to the editor should be brief, concise, and targeted to a specific tobacco concern.

Finally, opinion pieces that appear opposite the editorial page can raise awareness of an issue by providing more depth than a short letter. Opinion pieces should be 700 words or less. As its name suggests, an opinion piece is an opportunity to express a personal viewpoint. However, it should be well supported by facts and evidence.

Marcus Cooper and Barry Sharp of the TDH Office of Tobacco Prevention and Control contributed the material for this article.

Keep It Local: Getting the Media to Work for You

Local media -- such as tv and radio stations, newspapers, and local cable access channels -- are invested in the local community. It is in their best interest to cover stories that are important to local viewers, listeners, and readers.

This focus on what is local works to the advantage of public health practitioners and advocates. In fact, you can help reporters do their jobs by providing them with newsworthy events and information.



It often works best for an organization to assign one person as the media contact. This allows reporters and editors to place a specific name and face with your group. Also, it allows the media-contact person to serve as the

group's spokesperson, promote consistent messages, and build relationships with members of the media.

When developing a message, remember these points:

- ♦ keep it simple,
- ♦ keep it to a single subject, and
- ♦ keep it succinct.

In addition, you should have a solid grasp of your issue or topic and be able to explain it to people who may be unfamiliar with it. Always be prepared to emphasize the message that your organization is promoting. Never go into an interview just to answer questions.

When interacting with the news media, remember that reporters are people, too. Your ability to capture and maintain their attention and interest is as important as their ability to do the same with their viewers, listeners, or readers.

With that thought in mind, take time to explain the issue or event to the reporter. When working with tv reporters, make sure you have something visual that can help tell your story. For on-camera



interviews, look at the reporter, smile, stand up straight, and speak clearly. Wear plain clothes with solid colors, and avoid anything bright or flashy.

Local organizations have to be creative in bringing publicity to local issues and events that raise awareness of tobacco prevention. MA is a great way to start.

Marcus Cooper and Barry Sharp contributed the material for this article. For more information on media advocacy in your community, contact the TDH Office of Tobacco Prevention and Control at 512-458-7402 or 1-800-345-8647.

Alliance for a Tobacco-free Texas
Live it. Breathe it.

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Turning Research Into Practice

Research findings prove especially useful when they can assist practitioners at local, regional, or statewide levels. A recent study by researchers at Mississippi State University provides considerable insight into potential areas of media advocacy for tobacco control.³

This nationwide study found that the following issues were most susceptible to influence and change:

- ◆ 62% of Americans believe that smoking should not be allowed in work areas;
- ◆ 61% believe that restaurants

should be smoke-free;

- ◆ 59% support an increase in tobacco taxes to support cessation programs for adult smokers; and
- ◆ 48% are very much bothered by other people's smoke.

Public health practitioners in Texas may want to consider these findings when developing media advocacy events in their own communities. The above results indicate that a base level of support for such issues already exists. Thus, practitioners can plan their advocacy programs to coincide with public sentiment.

What Makes a Story Newsworthy?

There are a number of elements that make a story newsworthy to the media.⁴ When public health practitioners frame a story around one or more of these elements, it can increase the likelihood of the story receiving coverage.

The elements include:

- ◆ Breakthrough: Is there something about this story that makes it new or different?
- ◆ Celebrity: Is there a celebrity or local/statewide leader who will offer his/her name and image in

support of the issue?

- ◆ Controversy: Is the issue part of a current debate? Are there tensions among various interest groups?
- ◆ Injustice: Is the issue tied to an unfair situation or other inequalities?
- ◆ Local relevance: Is the issue meaningful or important to local citizens?
- ◆ Milestone: Will this issue's occurrence serve as a noteworthy historical marker?
- ◆ Personal angle: Who are the individuals personally affected by this issue and how have they been

affected?

- ◆ Seasonal relevance: Is the issue linked to a seasonal or annual event?

Certainly, there are no guarantees that a newspaper or tv station will produce a story on every topic of importance to public health practitioners. Keep in mind that airtime and print space are often limited. This means that some cases of media advocacy will succeed while others will not. Effective media advocacy requires a combination of perseverance, determination, and focus.

¹ Reducing Tobacco Use: A Report of the Surgeon General. USDHHS, 2000.

^{2, 4} Wallack, L., Dorfman, L., Jernigan, D., & Themba, M. Media Advocacy and Public Health. Sage Publications, 1993.

³ McMillen, R., Frese, W., & Cosby, A. The National Social Climate of Tobacco Control, 2000-2001. At: www.ssrr.msstate.edu